



Emergency Medical Services By Carole Raymond

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With the implementation of the IM project, a giant step forward for communication in emergency services operations will be achieved. First and foremost would be access to encrypted radios by EMS providers. With the new rules in patient privacy, it is vital to keep communication secure, but how can an emergency responder tell the receiving hospital what is in transit to them without violating this requirement? Cell phones have been used in the past, but this really is not a secure way to transmit sensitive information.

Rosebud County has a critical access hospital but it is small. There is one nurse on duty at night and the doctors are not always in the hospital, nor are lab technicians and x-ray technicians always available. It is vital to be able to give the hospital as much time as possible to contact extra help prior to the arrival of several ambulances with multiple patients. This is very typical of the smaller community hospitals. Limited resources are available but being able to communicate is imperative to improve patient outcome.

Rosebud County has three ambulance services because it is a very large county. There is an ambulance service in Forsyth and Colstrip. The town of Ashland has a quick response unit at the very corner of Rosebud County. Being a quick response unit means that they stabilize the patient until a transporting ambulance comes. They are not allowed to transport except in very critical situations. They have to be able to communicate and cell phone coverage is non-existent in southern Rosebud County and radio communication is poor at best.

A small volunteer ambulance service offers paramedic services in the county. It covers a large rural area where cell phone and radio communication is often very difficult. Rosebud County is ready to take the radio system to the next step. The infrastructure necessary to proceed exists and all that is needed are subscriber units to finish the project. It is very fortunate that Rosebud County is at this stage; this is the very rare exception. Most counties are not anywhere at this level of development. Still, better communication needs to be developed. Montana is a frontier with

fewer than six people per square mile. It is vital for emergency responders to be able to talk to medical control at all times; it can make the difference between life and death. The ambulance can travel as long as an hour before even reaching the scene. As far as responders have to travel, the roads are often graveled and sometimes they are dirt tracks. The driver needs to be able to use the radio without having to search for the right repeater and sometimes might not have coverage.

Responders need to talk to whomever they need without effort. If EMTs are unable to give pain relief because they cannot contact medical control, it is a terrible disservice to the patient. The hospital has patient charts that are not available to the ambulance crew but could be relayed to responders in the field if they are able to talk directly to the hospital. If the patient is unconscious, very young, or confused and unable to give a reliable history, a wrong drug could easily be given with a very unfortunate outcome.

Rosebud County's biggest concern for disasters is floods and wildland fires. Communicating during a flood is very important as well as during fires because they can cover a large area in a very short time. Emergency personnel need to be able to communicate without having to try to find a repeater that will work. These situations do not follow the interstate highway. Rescuing people can be very difficult at best but when a responder cannot talk to anyone, it makes it impossible.

Several Rosebud County EMS personnel have been trained to the paramedic level. They spent three years traveling 160 miles for every class. This was done on a volunteer basis and without compensation. They did it because they wanted to provide the best health care possible for our patients. Now there is an opportunity to be able to do even more for rural Montana – to develop the very best communication capabilities possible.

Carole Raymond is Rosebud County's Disaster and Emergency Services Coordinator.

Montana Population Facts

Of Montana's 129 Municipal Governments:

- **73 municipalities have fewer than 1000 residents**
- **47 municipalities have fewer than 500 residents**
- **Five municipalities have fewer than 100 residents**
- **One municipality (Ismay) has 25 residents**